

Andreas Kalvos and the Eighteenth-Century Ethos

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In the space of a few years the small isle of Zante, one of the Ionian group, produced three important poets: Hugo Foscolo, Dionysios Solomos, and the subject of this present study, Andreas Kalvos. Kalvos was born in 1792, fourteen years after Foscolo and six years before Solomos.¹ His father's family may originally have come from Crete. His mother's family was one of the aristocratic families of Zante—the family name had been inscribed ever since the Venetian occupation of the island in the Gold Book of the island nobility. The marriage of the poet's parents does not seem to have been a success, for not many years after the birth of his younger brother in 1794, the father, taking the two children with him, left Zante for Leghorn, where his brother was consul for the Ionian Islands, and where there was a considerable Greek colony. In 1805 Andreas' mother obtained a divorce from her husband on the grounds of desertion, and shortly afterwards she married for the second time. She died in 1815, never having seen her children again after their departure from Zante.

Little is known of Kalvos' early life in Italy. But a youthful apprenticeship to the difficult craft of poetry is made evident by the fact that in 1811 he wrote, in Italian, an ode 'To Napoleon' (his hero was still regarded as the great deliverer of the people of Europe from the chains of slavery and oppression). We really only pick up the threads of his life again in 1813, when he

1. For details of Kalvos' life given in this study, see R. Gartagani, *Andreas Kalvos Apanta* (Athens, 1960), pp. 5–251 *passim*.

became tutor at Florence to a ward of Hugo Foscolo. It was now that the important association of the two poets began, an association which was to be, from Kalvos' point of view, both stimulating and frustrating. From the beginning Foscolo seems to have assumed a somewhat patronizing attitude in his relationship with his young protégé. He set himself up as his mentor and put him through a long course of classical studies. Under Foscolo's influence and under the influence of his newly acquired classical learning Kalvos wrote, again in Italian, two tragedies, *Thiramenis* and *The Danaïdes*. Neither of these two works does more than imitate the example of Kalvos' master and in general that of other Italian writers like Alfieri, and neither has any intrinsic literary value.

In 1815 Foscolo was forced to leave Florence because of his 'advanced' ideas, and he took refuge in Switzerland. For a year Kalvos remained by himself in Florence, where he again became a teacher, and where he wrote his second Italian ode, 'To the Ionians', which is interesting only because it reveals that the poet, even at this stage and in spite of his adopted Italian, was nevertheless deeply conscious of his own country and of her plight. It was also during this period that Rousseau began to occupy a special place in Kalvos' philosophical and aesthetic reading. Then in 1816 he left Florence to join Foscolo in Switzerland, breaking up, it seems, a love-affair with a Jewish woman for the purpose. In the same year the two poets journeyed to London. There, a few months later, they quarrelled and separated. The precise reasons for the quarrel are not known and in any case need not detain us. It is enough to say that Foscolo later accused Kalvos of having exploited him, accepting his keep and counsel without return. Kalvos is silent about the whole affair. It seems likely, however, that the younger poet began to tire of his relationship with the elder; that he began to find the atmosphere too constricting, and that he felt the need to break away and establish his independence from the patronizing and probably somewhat possessive companionship of Foscolo. After the separation, Kalvos continued to live in London, earning his living by giving Italian and Greek lessons and by translating religious propaganda such as the *Liturgia Anglicana Polyglotta*. He seems in fact to have become quite an authority on religious questions, on which he

also wrote articles and gave lectures. After what seems to have been a succession of love-affairs, he married and had a daughter. Both wife and daughter died a few years later.

In 1821 Kalvos returned to Florence. His association with Foscolo, however, had made him politically suspect in the eyes of the authorities, and he was forced to go once more to Switzerland. There he came into contact with enthusiastic philhellenic circles. The date coincides with the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence. All the hopes and fears, ideals and enthusiasms which for years had been maturing in the heart of the Greek people came to a head and exploded. In 1824 Kalvos published his first ten Greek odes which, together with his second volume of a further ten odes, published in 1826, form one long hymn to Greece and to Greek freedom. These twenty odes were all he wrote in Greek: his first song was his swansong. In 1826, Kalvos left Switzerland for Greece, in order, as he writes in the dedication of his second volume of odes to General Lafayette, 'exposer un cœur de plus au feu de Musulmans'.

The phrase was rhetorical, but it expressed a genuine expectation and a genuine intention. Kalvos, when he left Switzerland, had no doubt hoped to find in Greece and to give his services to men who were the reincarnation of the ancient heroes of Marathon and of Salamis as seen through the distorting mirror of an idealizing classical tradition. No doubt he had hoped to receive welcome as a new Byron, ready to sacrifice his life on the altar of Greek freedom. He landed in Nauplia. His imaginary heroes he found to be but flesh and blood creatures, rough, unlearned, and obstinate who, if they performed acts of astonishing courage and daring, yet resented the presence of 'foreigners'—and Kalvos, although a Greek, was from their point of view a foreigner; who if they could at times sacrifice themselves without hesitation to their country, at other times were full of rival jealousies and hatreds. To Kalvos, who had expected something very different, their appearance must have been as disillusioning as the appearance of the strange and terrible Greek sailors to the philhellene Shelley. Far from being crowned as his country's new Tyrtaios, Kalvos was ignored. It may have been the shock of finding himself so out of contact with the Revolution and with the Revolutionaries whose ideals he had sung with such fervour that induced him to retreat. In

any case, he soon left for Corfu, to the welcome of, among others, Lord Guilford of the Ionian Academy. There he found an atmosphere more congenial to his temperament. But the poet in him appears to have suffered some injury beyond cure. Kalvos died, in England, in 1869. During the forty-three years between 1826—when he published his second volume of odes—and the day of his death, he did not write, as far as is known, a single further line of poetry.

This brief account of Kalvos' life serves as an approach to his poetry. This approach is not altogether easy. Kalvos' poetry has many characteristics which, as it were, prevent one from coming into contact with it, or at least prevent one from estimating its worth. It possesses in fact a dual or even a triple personality; and only after one has learnt to distinguish what is false in it, and why it is false, can one give it the real sympathy and attention that poetry demands. Take, for instance, the following poem, the first of his twenty odes, a hymn to his native island, Zante, which he had left when still a young child:

Beloved homeland,
isle of wonder,
Zante, you gave me
breath and Apollo's gift.

Accept the praise:
the gods hate the soul
of the ungrateful
and thunder above their heads.

Never shall I forget you,
never—though fate
far from you has flung me:
for twenty-five years have I been in strange countries.

But glad or miserable
when light enriches
mountain and wave
I set you always before my eyes.

When night with her pitch-black veil
covers
the sky's roses,
you are the one happiness of my dreams.

Once the sun lit my steps
on the blessed
Ausonian earth; there
clear air laughs always.

There the people rejoice;
there Parnassian girls
dance and the sacred
leaf crowns the lyre.

Wild and huge run
the seas; with violence
they pound and rend themselves upon
Albion's rocks.

Power and glory,
and abundant wealth,
are unloaded
on the shores of the clear Thames.

There the Aeolian breath
brought me; rays
of sweetest freedom
nourished and cured me.

And I admired your temples,
holy Celtic city;
what beauty, of thought, of spirit,
can you lack?

Farewell, Ausonia, farewell
Albion and glorious Paris;
lovely and alone, Zante
rules me.

Zakynthian woods,
her shaded hills
echoed once
with the silver bows of Artemis.

And now shepherds
still worship the trees
and the cool springs;
Nereids still haunt them.

The Ionian wave
first kissed the body,
first the Ionian breeze caressed the breasts
of Cytherea.

And when the evening star
glows in the sky
and ships sail
full of love and singing,

then the same wave kisses,
the same breeze caresses
the body and breasts
of white Zakythian girls.

Delicious your air,
beloved homeland,
enriching the sea
with the scent of gold lemons.

The king of the gods gave you
grape-bearing roots,
gave you bright, clear,
diaphanous clouds.

Eternal light
rains on your fruit by day,
and for you
night's tears become lilies.

If it falls, the snow
melts from your face,
hot summer
never dulls your emeralds.

Happy you are; and more
happy I call you
because you have never known
the harsh whip of tyrants.

Let my fate not give me
a tomb on a strange shore;
death is sweet only
when we sleep in our own land.²
(*The Patriot*)

Contemporary sensibility, once it has accepted the convention in which this poem is written, will not have much difficulty in responding to it, in responding to the pure lyric expression of a wanderer's love for his birth-place and his native land. The formal opening of the first two verses gives place quite naturally to the straightforward statement of a personal relationship in verses 3 to 5. In verses 6 to 12, where the motif of absence is expanded, one enters a dead patch; the passage is stylized, pedantic, and clumsy in its use of classical names; the poem is marking time, if not wasting time, and nothing would be lost if the verses were cut out: they add nothing to the weight of the poem and only hold it up. If one reads directly from verse 5 to verse 13, missing out the intervening verses 6 to 12, one has no sense that anything is lost and the transition is more easy than it is as the poem now stands. But once over that passage, and into verse 13, one is led through a series of visual images of Zante, and of nature, which are direct, fresh, daring, and beautiful. The classicism here is not dead; it is alive with the stamp of experience: Nereids still do haunt the waters; while the conceit of verses 15 to 17, with the image of the Ionian breeze and wave caressing 'the body and breasts' of Cytherea, before caressing the girls of Zante, is one of a fine sensuousness. Indeed, the whole passage has a delight and a spontaneity which is surprising, particularly within the convention in which Kalvos wrote.

If, however, from this straightforward lyrical utterance we turn to the last of Kalvos' twenty odes—and, it must be remembered, only two years separated the publication of the first and the last ode—quite another state of affairs presents itself. The poem is as follows:

2. All quotations from Kalvos' poetry are from: R. Gartagani, op. cit. The title in brackets after quotations from or references to individual poems is that of the poem in which the original Greek text will be found.

Hurry, brothers, hurry,
eager, courageous souls;
around the fatherland's
altar shining
hurry always.

Let disunity cease,
disunity which throws the nations,
blindly, beneath the harshest
claws of sleepless
treacherous tyrants.

Hurry here; in concord
let us weave the dance,
each one offering
splendid precious sacrifice
to the fatherland.

Here let us readily
purify our passions;
let us seize arms
only to wound
the Musulman's breast.

Let us pour here
all our wealth; while
we hold the naked sword,
laurel's honoured leaves
suffice us.

And then, when we have shattered
the most hated yoke,
freedom again will give us
other rewards, not
uncertain riches.

Here, friends, let us forsake
pleasure and rest;
a hard stone is the mattress
and poison the bread
of slavery.

Here, as votive offerings,
close beside the altar,
brethren, our children,
loved-ones and the elders
now let us leave.

Whatever our heart
holds most precious is not fit
for men who cower
before the senseless
barbarian sceptre.

Nor is life fit.
Hurry, brothers, hurry.
In measure let us dance,
in measure let us die
for the fatherland.

(The Altar of the Fatherland)

There is no need to question Kalvos' sincerity in writing this poem. No doubt he felt that his country was in danger because of her internal disunion. No doubt he desired his fellow-countrymen to sacrifice all private interest and pursuit for the sake of their nation's freedom. No doubt he felt that without such freedom nothing else had much value. What is of concern here is not Kalvos' sincerity, but whether this is or is not poetry; and the answer is that, even allowing for the gross inadequacy of the translation, it is not. It does not in fact contain a single line that can be called poetry. There is a great deal of mechanical pomp, verbalizing and gesture, but no poetry. It is not simply that Kalvos was trying to make poetry from elements out of which it cannot be made. There is no reason in itself why a poet should not take part in the political events of his times and voice the ideals and hatreds of local faction and party programme, and yet in spite of this still make poetry. Many poets have indeed enriched their work precisely through such participation in contemporary events, Dante and Yeats not being the least among them. But in Kalvos' case not only is the poetry not enriched; it is effectively stifled altogether.

At this point, it will help us to understand the startling lapse of

quality between Kalvos' first and his last ode and to sift the pure from the dross in his poetry if a few words are said about an English poet who at first sight may appear to have little in common with the Greek poet. Thomas Gray's position in English poetry is somewhere between that of Pope and Johnson on the one hand, and Keats and Wordsworth on the other. If that position is looked at from a broader point of view, one can say that Gray marks a transition between two periods. In the first everything in the universe was regarded as fixed, established, and in order; and the main concern of the poet was with the design of his poem. In the second everything was felt to be in movement, flowing, in growth, without break between one event and the next, organic; and the poet was concerned above all with the continuity and growth of his poem, with its organic development. In the former period, the poet tended to see in terms of a series of static, well-designed pictures, linked by artfully constructed transitions. The poet's great problem in fact was how to present, without losing coherence, a series of scenes, all contemporary, all co-existing, in the successive form which a poem demands. There was very little sense of organic growth within the poem. On the contrary, the actual order of scenes within the poem often seems arbitrary and even irrelevant: the order might quite well be changed without seriously disturbing the poem. The eighteenth century of Pope and Johnson saw in terms of separate pictures, not in terms of movement; and in pictures it saw design, not a reflection of the soul's rhythm. Hence the comparative lack of interest in narrative in this period. But in the latter period—that of Keats and Wordsworth—poets began to see all things as continuity, as imperceptible growth, without a transition from one scene to the next. Coleridge could say 'Landscape is music' and could talk of a 'streamy nature'. The change is one from an almost mechanical vision of things to an organic, even to a biological, vision: one recalls Goethe's words about producing 'not only something effective . . . but, as a rival of nature . . . something spiritually organic'. Or, from another point of view, important for our theme, it is a change from an attitude which gives to the rational consciousness the major part in the act of creation to one in which a more emotional and irrational element plays a dominant role.

Here lies the crux of the difference between the eighteenth century and that Romantic epoch which succeeded it. The qualities which commanded the admiration of the eighteenth-century world—balance, design, harmony—were qualities of the reason. The order and enlightenment respected were a rational order and enlightenment. The deliberate imposition of a chosen form, derived preferably from a classical model, on matter—a purely rational act—was the process whereby a work of art might be achieved. As a result, the emotional and irrational elements of man's nature tended to be suppressed and kept underground. But, since they are a part of life itself, they could not be extinguished. They smouldered on, in deep and swelling ferment, behind the formal neo-classic façade which too often the eighteenth-century vision mistook for the whole of reality, or at least for the whole of reality with which civilized man need concern himself. As far as the poetry of the eighteenth century goes, the vast world of man's emotional and irrational nature was held in check. Or it was nearly held in check. For now and then images from its depths do rise and force their way through to the surface—images of the night, the moon, death, the dark sea, cemeteries—provoking anxiety and a sense of guilt and giving warning to those who had ears to hear of the great upheavals which at the end of the century were to break through and destroy overnight the barriers of reason and order: the upheavals of the French Revolution and of the Romantic poets. One of the poets of the eighteenth century who felt this anxiety and had intimations of the turbulent darkness which lay biding its time but growing with the inevitability of the fertilized seed beneath the surface of life, and who sensed behind the static vision of the eighteenth century the clamour of new forces rising from within, was Gray.

The poetry of Gray, as the poetry of Kalvos, has a split personality. It stands on that point of rift when the formal, fixed designing neo-classic convention of the eighteenth-century poetic consciousness, with its series of static, isolated pictures leading up to an appropriate moral tag, begins to give way to a less regular, more sombre awareness. A poem of Gray's such as 'Ode on the Spring' is an example of the neo-classic convention at its best:

Lo! where the rosy-bosomed Hours,
 Fair Venus' train, appear,
 Disclose the long-expecting flowers,
 And wake the purple year.
 The Attic warbler pours her throat,
 Responsive to the cuckoo's note,
 The untaught harmony of spring;
 While, whispering pleasure as they fly,
 Cool Zephyrs thro' the clear blue sky
 Their gathered fragrance fling.

Here the lyric impulse is not so direct or so fresh as it is in Kalvos' 'The Patriot': it is more involved with a decorative artificiality, with a conventional neo-classicism; but it is strong enough to carry the poem through with grace and liveliness to the neat finish:

We frolic, while 'tis May.

But, charming though this kind of writing may be, what a change and deepening of atmosphere there is if we turn to:

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
 Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
 Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
 The moping owl does to the moon complain
 Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bower,
 Molest her ancient solitary reign.

What a change in moral climate there is between such pretty apophthegms as:

Nor all, that glitters, gold . . .

or:

Where ignorance is bliss
 'Tis folly to be wise . . .

and the following lines:

. . . their crimes confined;
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide . . .

It is not merely that the poet has changed his mood: it is that a whole new field of awareness has come into view, a whole new area of feeling and responsibility, something not included in the neo-classicism of 'Ode on the Spring': a warning of darker pains and of deeper misgivings than the too often self-satisfied, too complacent and impersonal mind of the eighteenth century recognized. In Gray's 'Elegy' is a tone of doubt and bewilderment heard seldom in the poetry of the eighteenth century. A small rift has opened through which is to pour in time the full flood of that subconscious and irrational world which the eighteenth century, with its growing confidence in man's perfectibility in and through a properly organized society, its growing belief in the progress of history towards a civilized and rational future, and to that end its avoidance of the more torturing problems of man's inner and intimate existence, had tended to suppress or at least had tried to keep at arm's length.

Gray himself—so far as his poetry is concerned—did not look again into that world after he had finished the 'Elegy'. A year or two later he was back on the more familiar, less threatening ground of:

Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake.
And give to rapture all thy trembling strings.
From Helicon's harmonious springs
A thousand rills their mazy progress take . . .

He 'shut the gates of mercy', if not on mankind, at least on those sources from which mankind draws a most fecund, though also a most disturbing, sustenance.

In the light of these few remarks on Gray's position in English poetry and on that eighteenth-century ethos in which it was produced, some of the difficulties in approaching Kalvos' poetry may become less obstinate. Kalvos learnt his art within

the framework of a poetical convention very similar to that within which Gray wrote. That this should have been the case in spite of the fifty years or so between the youth of one poet and that of the other, can be accounted for by the fact that the Ionian Isles were far removed from the centres of the intellectual life of Europe; that what was being taught in one generation in London or Paris would not affect the educational climate of Zante until the next. Especially is this so where the last half of the eighteenth century is concerned: the changes during this period at the centres of Europe's intellectual life were so rapid that the kind of atmosphere within which Blake wrote his prophetic books could exist at the same time and in the same country as the kind of atmosphere within which Jane Austen wrote her novels. It is not surprising then that Kalvos' conscious tastes and values should have been formed by a convention similar to that which affected Gray—tastes and values which belonged to a world already disrupted in many parts of Europe. And not only was this so where Kalvos' Zakynthian education was concerned; it was so also where his Italian education and, what is more important, where the influence of Foscolo were concerned. Foscolo's tastes and values were still largely those of the neo-classic 'enlightened' eighteenth century. Latin and Greek works were still the great models to which the poet must look. He must try to use their forms, their themes, their imagery and syntax; he must, like them, seek to inculcate moral and civic virtue. 'Converse night and day . . . with the great ones of antiquity,' Foscolo writes in a letter to Kalvos;³ 'refine your mind', 'establish your judgment', 'nourish soundly your spirit' 'with persistent and burning study of Latin and Greek authors'. It need hardly be pointed out that the eighteenth-century appreciation of the 'classics' was a very one-sided appreciation. In fact, what the eighteenth century saw in ancient poetry was a reflection of the values of its own 'natural philosophy', with its conception of a fixed, ordered, established universe. Its poets sought to reproduce these values in their own poetry. Kalvos inherited their ambition.

Unfortunately—and here we come to what is important for our understanding of Kalvos' situation—this external convention relating to poetry and poetics no longer

3. Cited R. Gartagani, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

corresponded to what was seeking expression in Kalvos' inner world. There was, that is to say, a fundamental dislocation between the means of expression and what had to be expressed; or, to put it in terms used when speaking of Gray's poetry, there was a fundamental dislocation between the Kalvos' conscious and subconscious worlds. For Kalvos, like Gray and, as we shall see, even more than Gray, possessed doubts and longings and anxieties and was tormented by misgivings incompatible with the balanced ordered eighteenth-century ethos. He was aware of stresses and tensions, forces and feelings which the eighteenth century—I use the term 'eighteenth century' on these occasions as synonymous with that intellectual outlook already described—had kept at arm's length. Where the eighteenth century had seen civilization and security, he was beginning to see death and destruction; where the eighteenth century had seen taste and wisdom, he was beginning to see artificiality and shallow pomposity. In other words, the climate of Kalvos' inner world was closer to that of the Romantic poets than it was to that of the eighteenth-century poets in whose idiom and according to whose values he was trying to write his poetry.

It is not difficult, at least from an external point of view, to show how this dichotomy may well have arisen. Kalvos spent the first years of his life on his island, Zante. It is easy to imagine what an impression that island and that period of his life made upon his young mind. To begin with, there was the sheer physical beauty of the island's natural scenery, and the delight of so many aspects of its life. Witnesses enough are to be found to testify to this beauty, travellers who, generally speaking, are without the sensibility of a poet. Henry Holland, who visited the island but a few years after the poet had left it, is typical. After describing his arrival at Zante, when the 'fragrant odour' from its plants and flowers was wafted across the sea to him and was 'distinctly perceptible even three miles from the land', he goes on to speak of 'its natural beauties sufficient to awaken all the attention of the stranger' and of the festival of All Saints' Day 'celebrated among the olive-groves near the city; where half the inhabitants of the place were assembled in their best dresses; some were walking, some dancing, others playing on the guitar, or forming a part in the religious processions; and various groups dining under the shade of the olive trees, according to

the usage of the day'.⁴ In addition, these Zakynthian years of Kalvos' childhood were associated with the presence of his mother. Only one of Kalvos' poems presents a definite figure, and that figure is his mother. Moreover, this is also the only poem which has a specific and personal religious content. The beauty of the Zakynthian landscape, the figure of his mother and his religious sense must have been closely interrelated in the poet's consciousness.

At about the age of ten, however, this idyllic life of love, tenderness, festival, and natural beauty was suddenly swept away from beneath his feet. He left his island. He left his mother. In the difficult times of his life which followed, Kalvos must have looked back to that period as one of blessedness. It must have appeared to him, his island and his life there, transfigured as it was by absence and nostalgia, as something ideal, without struggle, bitterness, or disruption; a Garden of Eden where, as he says in one of his poems, 'earth was paradise and life one'. It must in fact have corresponded to that vision of the landscape of childhood so vividly described by Traherne; a landscape in which, Traherne writes, 'I knew no childish proprieties, nor bounds nor divisions; but all the proprieties were mine, all treasures and the possessors of them.' As we shall see, in Kalvos' poetry we come again and again across scenes and descriptions of an idyllic life such as that which Traherne describes; and suddenly across these scenes and descriptions fall the shades of the prison-house of proprieties and bounds and divisions, and scenes and descriptions of violence or wilderness or destruction take their place.

Here then is a source of Kalvos' essentially romantic temperament: his childhood and youth and the influences dominant in them and his subsequent parting from them. But this quite instinctive and personal romanticism, this longing and nostalgia for an early life and for the feelings and ways associated with it, may in Kalvos' case have received support and, in a sense, justification, from two more literary sources. The first of these two more literary sources was Kalvos' reading of various pre-romantic poets and in particular of English 'sepulchral' poets like Parnell, Young, or Blair, or even Gray

4. Henry Holland, *Travels in the Ionian Islands, Albania, Thessaly, Macedonia etc.* (London, 1815), pp. 12–25.

himself, or of melancholy and nostalgic writers like Ossian. Few words need be said about this influence, since it was more an external one than one which corresponded to any deep inner affinity; that is to say, while these poets may have suggested to Kalvos a certain landscape of images—and this applies, as we shall see later, particularly in the case of one poem, Kalvos' ode 'To Death'—the use to which Kalvos put this landscape, and what he wanted to express through it, were markedly different. The English sepulchral poets, for instance, were not first of all interested in what one might call metaphysical themes, themes of heaven and hell and purgatory; still less were they concerned, as Foscolo was in his famous sepulchral poem, to throw into relief the value and dignity of man in this life. They sought to describe as directly as possible physical corruption and the odours of the tomb, the change from the state of physical well-being to that of bodily dissolution, from worldly pomp to the solemn banquet of worms:

Methinks I see thee with thy head low laid,
While surfeited upon thy damask cheek
The high-fed worm, in lazy volumes rolled,
Riots unscared . . .

writes Robert Blair; and Thomas Parnell adds the comforting moral reflection to which this contemplation of bones, epitaphs, marble pillars, weeping angels, and the charnel house is meant to give rise: that of the virtuous man's undoubted salvation after death:

Death's but a path that must be trod,
If man would ever pass to God;
A port of calms, a state of ease
From the rough rage of swelling seas.

The true significance of that death and resurrection which lie at the heart of all important spiritual life and which signify man's transcendence of his own individuality and his participation in the energies and perceptions of a higher state of existence, has been lost; and the domesticated, emasculated 'religious'

consciousness is now focused on a purely natural death leading with prosaic certainty to a purely 'natural' resurrection. Such an attitude does not have a place in Kalvos' world; as we shall see, he still retained some awareness of a less superficial outlook. But there is no doubt that his reading of these poets did sharpen his awareness of his own world and did also provide him with certain images important for his poetry.

The second of these two literary sources which may have lent support to Kalvos' instinctive romanticism is the work of Rousseau. We have seen that when Kalvos was living at Florence in the years after 1813 he gave special place in his studies to Rousseau. He may well have felt in Rousseau's ideas echoes of his own feelings; he may have felt that these feelings were given, as it were, a moral dignity by being so close to those voiced by so famous a man. 'Give us back ignorance, innocence, and poverty, which alone can make us happy. . . ' wrote Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. He did not mean by this the ignorance, innocence, and poverty of man in society; he meant those of pre-social man, of the unspoiled child of nature. In the primitive state of nature, men lived 'free, healthy honest and happy lives'. Man is naturally good. He is born free and everywhere he is in chains. Crafty and powerful men have broken down and disrupted the state of nature; they have founded a society 'which irretrievably destroyed natural liberty, eternally fixed the law of property and inequality, converted clever usurpation into unalterable right and, for the advantage of a few ambitious individuals, subjected all mankind to perpetual labour, slavery and wretchedness'. For this there was but one cure: to get back as close as possible and as soon as possible to that original state of nature and to follow nature's laws. Thus *Émile* is a plea for naturalism in education, the *New Héloïse* for naturalism in morals. Much of this must have sounded poignantly true to Kalvos, for his own experience must have seemed to bear direct and painful witness to it. When had he been happy but in that pre-social age of youth, surrounded by the beauties of land, sea and sky, living a carefree life of natural innocence and unknowing under the protective care of his mother? And he had been deprived of that happiness by man-made proprieties, bounds and divisions, by artificial conventions and formulas. The Golden Age, the Earthly

Paradise, had been broken and disfigured by an alien world; it had been usurped and blotted out.

Nor was this all. Did not in fact the actual state of contemporary Greece as a whole, quite apart from his own sentiment, bear living witness to this same process of the destruction of natural innocence and of gradual enslavement? For there, in Greece (though this Greece may never have existed anywhere but in the dream-world of a totally unreal past)—there, in Greece, men had lived innocent and unspoiled lives until the perverted ambitions of foreign conquerors had ‘irretrievably destroyed natural liberty’ and had set everyone in chains. In this way, from a purely personal and subjective romanticism Kalvos could elaborate a politico-religious philosophy with which he could integrate his neo-classic vision of ancient Greece and by means of which he could fulfil the eighteenth-century conception of the poet as a public figure who through his poetry could teach and inculcate a social morality and exhort his fellow-men to action. That is to say, he could respectably conventionalize what was, from the point of view of those eighteenth-century values to which he consciously subscribed, a thoroughly disreputable romanticism.

Thus then, by way of this introduction, we reach a better understanding of Kalvos’ own personal situation and so perhaps a critical vantage-point from which we are able to appreciate his poetry. On the one hand, there is the Kalvos who consciously seeks to live up to the eighteenth-century conception of the poet, to reflect in his poetry its approved social and moral lessons, and to do all this by means of its poetic convention based on what were regarded as the canons of classical art. This is the external Kalvos, the teacher who through his work is to help society towards its glorious, enlightened, and liberated future: the impersonal public figure with a conscious historical role, even a maker of history. On the other hand, behind the gestures and the verbalism, the posturizing and the moral exhortation, the rigid convention and the pedantic classicism, is Kalvos the person, with all his private grief and anxiety, his great longings and sudden insights, his loneliness and despair; with all that submerged world of the exile who remembers with pain his vanished country and his mother’s vanished tenderness, and whose intuitions of an almost

unearthly earthly beauty and radiance are shattered by a terrible sense of doom and human loss: the Kalvos outside society, outside history, behind the conscious façade, alone in his world of torturing private experience and of little or no consolation. These two sides of Kalvos' nature were never reconciled and integrated: conscious and subconscious never became one, as they must if an artist is to develop beyond a certain point. Given the relatively superficial values of the eighteenth century which dominated the poet's consciousness, they could not become one; or, to put it the other way round, they could only have become one if the poet had been able to surrender those values for an understanding of life that would have made possible the integration he lacked on a higher level; and this, as we shall see, he was unable to do, just as it has also been something that Gray had been unable to do. And as these two sides of Kalvos' nature remained separate and antagonistic in his life, so they remained separate and antagonistic in his poetry; and through their ill-fated division his whole poetic life was, it seems, destroyed.

We can now turn back to Kalvos' own poetry, to trace the phases through which it passed as the living, responsive human voice is slowly stifled beneath the conventional mask and as the freshness of the greater part of 'The Patriot' gives place more and more to the verbiage of 'The Altar of the Fatherland'. First there is the lyric, exciting dawn, when images of daring catch the note of untroubled happiness in an earthly paradise, in a world free from proprieties, bounds, and divisions: the golden age of man's youth in a landscape of pristine beauty, in an idealized state of nature and of primitive innocence similar to that of Homer's Ethiopia whose blameless inhabitants lived feasting in joy and were beloved by the gods:

Now dawn opens the flowers
on earth's cool breast,
and now appear
the works of industrious men.

The scented lips of day
kiss
the world's rested forehead;
dreams, darkness,

Sleep, silence, vanish, and again
flocks and lyres
fill the fields with sound,
fill sea and air and all the cities.
(*The Ocean*)

Or:

Beautifully, sweetly, you appear,
O golden-lashed
daughter of the Sun,
gladly, day, you come forth.

Freeman or slave,
what does it matter—
only let man live,
for earth is Paradise and life one.

Come, while the scented fingers
of Aphrodite
flutter the strings, and the tender
guitar charms the earth;

Hasten, you carefree
crowd of people: seize,
young men and girls,
the big delicious jar of Bessareos.

With Sidonian shirt
and gold-laced sandals,
dancing sing
the Lesbian mode or other song.

Enough of drinking now,
enough of song and dance;
if each delight has measure,
let us turn to a fresh joy.

Come here under the thick-leaved
cool cedars:
let us rest our body, let us have
flowers as mattress.

(*To Psara*)

Or again:

O home of the Zephyrs,
when elsewhere the sun's
rays scorch the mountains
or winter night cuts the springs,

Then your breast flowers,
your skies shine,
and your fruit-bearing
trees always are laden.

As, before night falls,
the sweet star of Aphrodite
alone shines out
in the blue air;

As the proud myrtle,
heavy with flowers and dew,
gleams when the gold-girdled
dawn greets her:

So the ship, beating
the Icarian wave, sees
you among the islands
splendid and towering, and rejoices.

(To Samos)

All this corresponds, we said, to a state of primordial innocence: a kind of childhood state before consciousness is awakened and divides life into antinomies; and this state is conveyed in a series of separate and static images which succeed one another with little organic link but which often have a vivid sensuousness and beauty.

Then consciousness and thought awaken and disrupt the harmony of life by their questionings and probings. The mind begins to impose its own laws and divisions over the lyric, idyllic and idealized landscape of childhood innocence; shades of the prison-house begin to fall. In Kalvos' personal life we can find a counterpart for this in his leaving Zante and his mother and his childhood to face an unknown, lonely, and uprooted world; or, from a deeper mythological point of view, we can see it as that

phase in human life which we express as the sunset or the overthrow of the gods: as man's loss of paradisaical innocence and his waking to a world of mind-forged manacles, moral law, and physical bondage. But just as Kalvos gave his instinctive feeling for and insight into childhood innocence and natural beauty a poetic and political respectability by expressing them in terms of an idealized Arcadian landscape, so now he conventionalized his sense of loss, rupture, spoliation, and imprisonment by projecting it in terms of political indignation at the over-running of Greece by the Turks and at the spectacle of his country under a foreign yoke. Nevertheless, it is the pathos of genuine experience which sounds in such lines as the following, an experience we can easily identify and which must have been one of genuine pain for Kalvos:

If before nightfall the sea
separates the bold
sailor from his island,

With bitter soul
he stands at the prow
gazing at the stillness and the twilight
which hovers above the water.

He sees the beloved
mountains and fields
of his dear country
red still from the sun.

But already in the dark
bowl of the West
sinks the last ray
of the shining king of the air.

And the island cliffs
change and darken, as the young
face of an orphan
wet with clouds of distress . . .

(To the British Muse)

With this description of man's parting from his land of innocence and of his entering the world of darkness and estrangement, go other images of loss:

Smoke saddens the blue
distance of the sky, as
in the mist of death
a smile chokes a child . . .
(*To Chios*)

Or:

Streams of forgetfulness
spill from the vase and make
everything vanish:
cities, kingdoms, nations are lost.
(*To the Sacred Company*)

Or:

Ah, the hopes of man
dissolve
as the light dreams of a child;
they sink as fine shot
to the sea's fathomless depth.
(*To the British Muse*)

Scenes of desolation, of wilderness, of a paradise deserted,
replace those of the happy life:

Green, sweet-smelling
isles of the Aegean sea,
happy lands
where joy and peace always dwell:

Where now are your splendid
girls who had
souls like fire, lips
like cool roses, throats like milk?

In your rich gardens
basil and lilies
flower vainly: alone,
not one hand left to tend them.

Your woods, your ravines
where the hunter's voice used to echo
are silent: only
masterless dogs bark there.

Horses free and unbridled
gallop among the vines
and on them only
rides the breath of the wind.

Fearless, crying, gulls and falcons
descend
from the clouds
down to the shore.

Deep in the sand I see
tracks of living
children and men;
but where are the men, where are the children?
(*Ta Iphaisteia*)

Over this scene of desolation all that is left is the sense of sorrow:

As the afflicted noonday wind
blows
through the wood of evening
like a human dirge:

So ocean-daughters bear
to the deserted island
the waves
and their lamenting.
(*To Chios*)

In no poem, however, is this experience of the loss of life and of total eclipse darkening all man's existence so vividly expressed as in the ode 'To Death'. This ode is at the same time an ode to the poet's mother. Her death is the symbol of this overwhelming loss, just as her life is the symbol of the state of innocence and blessedness. She thus takes on an aspect which is more than merely autobiographical. She becomes in some sense the Mother: she whose arms are always open to the child when

he flies from the bitter rods and endless torments of the world; she in whom man seeks the dim, comforting memory of that warmth and peace of his life before the waking of consciousness, of the milk-like consolation which soothes his dreams of innocence; whose only law is love and whose only sentence forgiveness; who is the ground of life itself and of its fruitfulness, and so linked intimately with that inner world of man from which his own life and fruitfulness rise. She stands in fact for all that is opposite to the world of rational consciousness, the world of laws, prescriptions, moral codes, and political programmes, 'enlightenment' and culture; opposite, one might add, to those values and standards of the eighteenth-century world by which Kalvos was increasingly dominated. Hence, more than any other, this is a 'key' poem in Kalvos' work, for it issues from the heart of his own personal situation as well as from the heart of a perennial human situation. The setting of the poem is one which Kalvos may well have 'borrowed' from the sepulchral poets: that of a graveyard at night, with its tombs and cold moons and phantoms:

Here in this church,
building of the first Christians,
how came I,
kneeling?

Huge wings of midnight,
silent, black, frozen,
cover the earth.

Quiet here: relics
of the saints sleep;
quite quiet: do not disturb
the sacred rest of the dead.

I hear the rushing of the wind's fury;
madly it beats; windows
of the church open,
torn to pieces.

From the sky
where black-winged clouds sail
the moon
throws her cold silver;

And she lights a chill
white silent tombstone:
spent censers, spent candles, funeral cakes
cover the grave.

O God in Heaven, what stirs?
What possesses me? My hair
stands on end and my breath stops.

See, the tomb shakes!
See, from the crack rises
a white vapour
and stands before me.

It thickens, takes
a human form.
Who are you? Tell me. Creature
or ghost of my troubled mind?

Or are you someone
who dwells in the tomb?
You smile? From Heaven
or from Hell—tell me whence you come?

The phantom is the poet's mother. She now addresses her son,
comparing her release with mortal affliction as she answers his:
'tell me whence you come?':

Do not ask. Do not search out
the inexpressible
mystery of death. You behold
the breast that suckled you before you.

O my child, my child,
my tender loved-one,
our fates are separate, and
vainly you seek to clasp me.

Stop your tears, calm
your heart's anguish;
if in unhopèd-for joy you weep because you see me,

Rejoice, rather, and be glad;
if you complain because I left the sun,
console yourself.

What do you lament? Unknown
to you is my soul's state;
and in the grave my body rests from labour.

Yes, life is insupportable labour;
hopes and fears,
joys and delights of the world
torment you.

Here we the dead enjoy
everlasting peace, a sleep
fearless, sorrowless,
without dream.

You, cowards, tremble,
hearing the name
of inescapable death.

One only is the road
and leads
to the tomb; indomitable fate
compels the living there.

My son, alive you knew me:
the sun spider-like revolving
wound me
ceaselessly with light and death.

The spirit that gave me life
was God's breath
and to God has returned:
my body was earth, and fell here to the grave.

But the light of the moon
fades, and I must leave you.
I shall see you again
when life forsakes you, and only then.

Go, and my blessing with you.
I say no more. What remains
I shall disclose later.
Farewell, my child, farewell . . .

The vision vanishes, leaving the poet 'in thick darkness'. He now laments her absence and proclaims his intention to cross over the abyss which separates them—a 'crossing over' that represents a triumph over death and death's laws:

O voice, O mother,
consolation of my childhood,
eyes which shed on me sweet tears:

And you, mouth that I kissed
so many times, with such
warm love, how many
boundless abysses divide us?

Ah, let them be boundless,
and more than boundless,
intrepidly I shall cross them,
seeking you.

Now my lips can kiss
the knees of death,
now can I crown his skull.

Where are the roses? Fetch
the fadeless wreaths and the lyre.
Sing.
The terrible enemy has become a friend.

Can he who embraced frail woman
put fear
into the heart of man?

Who is in danger?
Now that I face death with courage
I hold
the anchor of salvation.

As the eagle flies from mountain to mountain,
so I scale
the difficult cliffs of virtue.

(To Death)

We have called this a 'key' poem from two points of view. First, because it issues from the heart of Kalvos' own personal situation and, second, because it reveals a perennial human situation and one which became particularly acute towards the end of the eighteenth century. In fact, the 'split' we have recognized in Kalvos' personality and which is reflected in his poetry is also that which threatened to destroy and in the end did destroy the balanced intellectual ethos of the eighteenth century. The 'split' in both cases resulted from an inability to reconcile and integrate the rational and irrational elements of human life on a higher level, on a level of understanding that transcends the purely rational level. By and large the eighteenth century had suppressed or had attempted to suppress what did not conform to the single vision of the mind; it had tended to think that what was true must be rational and that to believe in what was not rational was a sign of superstition or marked a stage in human development which man must surpass. Rational truth was what it most valued, not supra-rational truth. In his ode 'To Death' Kalvos steps out of the closed world of the eighteenth century and reveals the depths beyond. This comes about by a strange but crucial logic. That state of paradisaical pre-conscious innocence from which life had 'fallen' was, for reasons we have seen, associated for Kalvos with his mother: his mother symbolized this state for him. But now this mother was dead and in the kingdom of death—buried, one might say, in the deepest recesses of the poet's memory. Thus, by that strange logic of which we have spoken, that lost paradisaical state, symbolized by the mother, now itself exists in the kingdom of death, in the unexplored depths of the human memory. It follows that the only way of recovering it is by going beyond the limits of the conscious daylight world and by penetrating into and resuscitating those inner depths of memory:

How many
boundless abysses divide us?

Ah, let them be boundless,
and more than boundless,
intrepidly I shall cross them
seeking you.

Man's life is a ceaseless revolving between light and death. Somewhere beyond the gulf which opens at the frontiers of the daylight world of rational consciousness is the other world. To realize this other world so that its vitalities and understandings penetrate and enrich his ordinary mortal life, man must cross over this gulf. He must visit death's kingdom. This is the recognition which Kalvos' 'To Death' expresses.

But what happens? Does Kalvos in fact seek to live out this recognition? On the contrary, like Gray, he shuts the gates, puts on the mask, posturizes, talks of scaling cliffs of virtue or, in another poem, of playing the lyre at the edge of the open tomb. He does not in fact (at least as far as we can judge from his poetry) realize the full significance of that metaphysical death, if one may call it that, which lies at the heart of all important spiritual experience and which is the prelude to any real life. He remains on this side of it. He does not cross the gulf which divides him from that fuller state of existence of which he is aware. George Seferis, in a critical study of Kalvos' work, has compared Kalvos with Hamlet: 'The Prince of Denmark wishes to kill the murderer of his father, and he kills, behind the screen, Polonius. What has happened to him? He explains and talks when he should be acting. The same thing happens sometimes to Kalvos: he talks, he does not act. Poetry is also an action ...'⁵

This is a just assessment. Kalvos had a sense of human destiny which went beyond that of the eighteenth century within whose conventions he wrote and to a large extent lived. But instead of remaining true to this sense and realizing that destiny and the vision of life that went with it, he dressed up both in a mass of moral, literary, and political verbiage borrowed from contemporary fashion, and in the end he smothered them altogether. He was unwilling or unable to face the reality of which he was aware. He sacrificed the private being, to whom the poet must always remain faithful, to the impersonal, public, and conventional figure of the poet. His decision to go to Greece to 'exposer un cœur de plus au feu de Musulmans' was in fact simply one further rhetorical gesture with which he sought to avoid what for him would have meant real action: an attempt

5. G. Seferis, 'Prologos yia mia ekdosi ton "odon"', *Dokimes* (Athens, 1962), pp. 160–1.

to heal the breach in his divided nature. Such action would have meant for him a vital re-orientation. It is a big step from that optimism which leads man to think he can find perfectibility and happiness in and through a properly organized society and which presupposes therefore man's natural goodness—it is a big step from this optimism to a view which sees life in society and nature as tragic conflict and struggle in which man's worst enemy is himself. Kalvos, it seems, was not able to make that step. He clung to his public optimism in spite of his inner knowledge of a world beyond such optimism. As a result, his gesture of self-sacrifice for the sake of his country, being but a gesture, crumbled at the first touch of reality. As we have seen, Kalvos left Greece for Corfu a few days after his arrival at Nauplia and, so far as his poetry is concerned, the rest is silence.

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